

ASPI AUKUS update 1: May 2022

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Introduction

On 16 September 2021, the leaders of Australia, the UK and the US announced the creation of a new trilateral security partnership called 'AUKUS'—Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.¹

In a brief statement, the leaders outlined the purpose of AUKUS:

Through AUKUS, our governments will strengthen the ability of each to support our security and defense interests, building on our longstanding and ongoing bilateral ties. We will promote deeper information and technology sharing. We will foster deeper integration of security and defense-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains. And in particular, we will significantly deepen cooperation on a range of security and defense capabilities.²



The original joint leaders' statement on AUKUS. Source: US Embassy in Australia.

They stated that the first initiative under AUKUS was to support Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs). However, the statement also announced efforts that would focus on four areas of advanced technology:

- cyber capabilities
- artificial intelligence
- quantum technologies
- additional undersea capabilities.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has provided further comments on AUKUS, for example at ASPI's inaugural Sydney Dialogue on 17 November 2021, but, on the whole, the three governments have released few further details of how AUKUS will be implemented.³ Nor has the text of a written agreement (should it exist) been released.

The lack of detail has led to much public speculation in the media and commentariat, in which many project their own hopes or fears onto the partnership. Perhaps the best discussion of the partnership—and debunking of the more misplaced speculation—is *What is AUKUS and what is it not?* by ASPI's Michael Shoebridge. It's a useful starting point to understand the purpose and scope of AUKUS. Shoebridge emphasised that AUKUS 'is not a military alliance that contains commitments to come to each other's aid in times of crisis and conflict.' Rather, 'AUKUS is a trilateral technology accelerator between the governments of the three nations with a ruthless focus on increasing the military power of each of our militaries by accelerating the development and application of key technologies into the hands of our service men and women.'⁴

At a time of rapidly increasing strategic uncertainty, when it's increasingly clear that authoritarian regimes are willing to use military power to achieve their goals, it's important to monitor the implementation of AUKUS so that governments and the public can assess whether it's achieving the goal of accelerating the fielding of crucial military technologies.

To track the implementation of AUKUS, ASPI will publish regular updates covering:

- developments in the definition of the scope of AUKUS
- progress in the delivery of announced AUKUS outcomes
- perceptions of AUKUS in other countries
- analysis of AUKUS in the media, academia and think tanks.

This is the first of those updates.

Key developments

We can divide developments into three broad categories:

- Further definition of what AUKUS is and how it will be implemented
- Progress on the SSN program
- Progress on the other areas of advanced technology.

Further definition of what AUKUS is and how it will be implemented

All three partners have now appointed officials to lead AUKUS efforts or assigned responsibilities to existing officials' portfolios.

At the peak of the AUKUS architecture is the Senior Officials Group. The Australian representatives are Phil Gaetjens, who is the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), and Michelle Chan, who is the National Security Adviser. The UK is also represented by its National Security Adviser, Stephen Lovegrove, and Jake Sullivan in the US rounds out a trio of national security advisers. AUKUS coordination across the government is led in Australia by Scott Dewar, who is an official in PM&C, and by Emil Levendoglu in the UK. The US has taken a different path, discussed below.

Two joint steering groups have been established: one covering the SSNs, and the other covering all other areas of advanced technology. The Australian lead for the SSNs is Vice Admiral Jonathan Mead, the head of the Nuclear-Powered Submarine Taskforce, and the UK lead is Vanessa Nicholls, Director General Nuclear, who is responsible for coordinating the delivery of all activities across the defence nuclear enterprise. The Australian lead for advanced capabilities is Peter Tesch, Deputy Secretary Strategy, Policy and Industry, and the UK lead is Air Marshal Richard Knighton, Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Financial and Military Capability). Below the joint steering groups are working groups on each area of technology.

The US appears to have taken a more centralised approach, appointing a single official to coordinate all areas of AUKUS. This is James Miller, former Undersecretary of Defense Policy. Miller will lead AUKUS coordination in the US as well as be the US lead on the two joint steering groups. He was also appointed to the US National Security Council staff, which is intended to provide direct access to the President.⁵

On 17 November 2021, Prime Minister Morrison stated that officials would report back to leaders within 90 days of the initial announcement with a proposed AUKUS work plan. That would have been in February 2022.⁶ The work plan hasn't been released, but the workload to implement the plan will be substantial. To meet the added workload of implementing AUKUS and the government's planned sovereign guided weapons enterprise, the Australian Defence Department's civilian workforce was increased by around 540.⁷

There have been many meetings at many levels. On 19 February 2022, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss held a meeting on the margins of the Munich Security Conference. The rather minimalist readout stated that the meeting discussed progress made in implementing initiatives within the AUKUS trilateral security partnership and underscored the importance of setting a strong nonproliferation example with Australia's new SSNs.⁸

On 5 April 2022, the partners released a fact sheet reporting the following meetings:⁹

- Senior Officials Group. On March 10, 2022, National Security Advisors from the three allies met virtually to review AUKUS progress and provide direction to the trilateral partnership going forward.
- Joint Steering Groups. The three countries have held multiple Joint Steering Group meetings for each of the two AUKUS lines of effort, including in-person sessions in Canberra, London, and Washington, D.C.
- Working Groups. Seventeen trilateral working groups have been established (nine relating to conventionally-armed nuclear-powered submarines, and eight relating to other advanced military capabilities); each has met multiple times.

One encouraging development was the announcement on 1 April 2022 of the formation of a bipartisan AUKUS Working Group in the US Congress, aka the 'AUKUS caucus'. Its members, drawn from both the Democratic and Republican parties, stated that 'the AUKUS Working Group will provide a forum for congressional attention on the implementation of AUKUS and on completing the steps needed to strengthen our already-existing security relationship.'¹⁰

There doesn't appear to be an analogous group in the Australian Parliament, although the Australian Labor Party expressed support for AUKUS at the time of the announcement and reaffirmed it on the eve of Australia's federal election.¹¹

Progress on the SSN program

As a primer on the key issues that Australia's SSN program will need to address, ASPI published *Implementing Australia's nuclear submarine program* in December 2021.¹² This provides analysis of the decision space available to the government and the key risks involved.

Australia has formed the Nuclear-Powered Submarine Taskforce, which is to report within 18 months of the initial announcement (that is, around March 2023) on the optimal pathway to deliver an SSN capability. By early May 2022, its workforce had grown to 226.¹³

An early achievement that illustrates the potential for the partners to do business differently was the signing on 22 November 2021 of the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement between Australia, the UK and the US (Figure 1). Defence Minister Peter Dutton stated that the agreement will enable information sharing that will ‘support Australia in completing the 18 months of intensive and comprehensive examination of the requirements underpinning the delivery of nuclear-powered submarines’. The agreement will also allow Australian personnel to access ‘training and education from their UK and US counterparts, necessary for learning how to safely and effectively build, operate and support nuclear-powered submarines’.¹⁴

Figure 1: Minister for Defence Peter Dutton signs the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement with the US and the UK, 22 November 2021, as a first step in what will need to be a comprehensive partnership agreement



Source: Defence image library, [online](#).

ASPI has noted that the agreement is:

a vital first step to support the work of the Nuclear-Powered Submarine Taskforce. The signing of an information sharing agreement on such a sensitive area of technology only two months after AUKUS was announced suggests both that the taskforce is moving fast and that all three partners are open to new approaches.¹⁵

The agreement’s supporting documentation states that it ‘is only intended to facilitate the sharing of naval nuclear propulsion information. A subsequent agreement would need to be negotiated to support transfers of equipment, materials or technology related to nuclear naval propulsion.’ After consideration by the parliaments of Australia and the UK and the US Congress, the initial agreement entered into force on 8 February 2022.

Australia’s acquisition of submarines powered by highly enriched uranium raises proliferation issues. Meeting the three states’ nonproliferation commitments will require close consultation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In a trilateral statement to the IAEA’s board of governors, the three states said:

We emphasize today our willingness and intent to proceed in an open and consultative manner, especially regarding issues of nuclear material, facilities, and activities relevant to the IAEA.

We also reiterate our assurance that the trilateral cooperation between Australia, the US and the UK will be fully consistent with the three parties' respective non-proliferation obligations—and that this cooperation will be pursued in a manner that preserves the integrity of the non-proliferation regime.¹⁶

The IAEA's Director General has also confirmed to its board of governors that 'A first technical meeting was held between the three parties and the Secretariat's AUKUS team I established last September. All are committed to ensuring the highest non-proliferation and safeguards standards are met.'¹⁷

Nevertheless, it's already apparent that some other member states aren't going to give Australia an easy passage at the IAEA. China has pushed for special consideration of the transfer of highly enriched uranium to Australia through a standing agenda item on AUKUS or a special committee. The AUKUS members have pushed back on this as 'blatant politicisation', arguing that it's too early to have the board of governors consider an appropriate safeguards regime.¹⁸ According to media reporting, Australia has reinforced its diplomatic personnel in Canberra and Vienna to manage engagement with the IAEA.¹⁹

An SSN capability requires many more elements than just the submarines. A step forward was made on the facilities for the capability on 7 March, when the government announced that a submarine base would be established on Australia's east coast to complement the existing one on the west coast. Granted, an east coast submarine base had already been part of the broad plan to grow Australia's submarine capability from six to 12 conventional submarines, and a funding line of up to \$10 billion had been programmed into Defence's investment plan to deliver it. However, this announcement narrowed the potential locations down to Brisbane, Newcastle and Port Kembla. More detailed analysis is now being undertaken, along with engagement with the states and local communities. The government stated that a final decision on the location will be made in late 2023.²⁰

The Australian Defence Department is also ramping up a nuclear training program, in which one strand is aimed at producing nuclear engineers and the other at producing people with less technical qualifications who can work in stewardship and support roles.²¹

Progress on the other areas of advanced technology

Progress has been less visible in the other areas of technology, although the 6 April statement says that working groups for each technology area have met multiple times. The 17 December 2021 readout from the Joint Steering Group meeting on advanced capabilities stated that, beyond the initial four areas of focus announced in September, additional areas for collaboration were being considered.²² On 6 April, the AUKUS leaders released a second joint statement that confirmed those areas as:²³

- hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities
- electronic warfare
- innovation
- information sharing.

No detail was provided on whether or how those new trilateral activities would be integrated with existing bilateral activities in those areas, such as the SCIFiRE collaborative agreement between Australia and the US announced in December 2020.²⁴

The 2022–23 Australian federal budget, released on 29 March 2022, effectively provided a doubling of the budget for the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) through the REDSPICE program, which will be funded at \$9.9 billion over the coming decade. According to Defence Minister Peter Dutton, the program is intended to 'substantially increase ASD's offensive cyber capabilities'.²⁵ While the government didn't describe how REDSPICE would work with the AUKUS partnership, it's difficult to see how ASD can achieve the ramp-up in its budget (for example, from \$1,165 million in 2021–22 to \$2,277 million in 2023–24) and workforce without significant cooperation with the AUKUS partners.²⁶

International perspectives

This section provides a range of statements by foreign governments and senior officials on the AUKUS announcement.

Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Motegi Toshimitsu, 21 September 2021:

Japan welcomes the launch of AUKUS in the sense of strengthening engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.²⁷

Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla, 21 September 2021:

From our perspective, it [AUKUS] has neither relevance to Quad, nor will it have any impact on its functioning.²⁸

Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Zhao Lijian, 22 September 2021:

Cooperation on nuclear-powered submarine technology between the US, the UK and Australia will gravely undermine regional peace and stability, aggravate arms race and impair international nuclear non-proliferation efforts. It runs counter to regional countries' wishes. The three countries should discard the Cold War zero-sum mentality and narrow geopolitical perspective, follow the trend of the times for peace and development, and stop forming exclusive blocs or cliques.²⁹

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, 30 September 2021:

We also took advantage of the meeting today in order to rather directly convey our concerns to the Americans with regards to them creating together with the UK and Australia a new high-technology AUKUS partnership with the technology transfer of a nuclear propulsion system to Australia expected within its framework in the context of the expected construction of eight nuclear submarines of this country's navy. We noted that the actions of this kind poorly aligned with the non-proliferation regime, including its aspect related to ensuring the guarantees of not shifting the nuclear material and nuclear activity from peaceful to military needs.³⁰

French Ambassador to Australia Jean-Pierre Thebault, 18 September 2021 regarding the cancellation of the Attack class program in favour of SSNs:

I think this has been a huge mistake, a very, very bad handling of the partnership—because it wasn't a contract, it was a partnership that was supposed to be based on trust, mutual understanding and sincerity.³¹

Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs Saifuddin Abdullah, 19 September 2021:

I share the Prime Minister's concerns that the establishment of AUKUS could lead to the escalation of arms race in the region. It could also potentially spark tension among the world superpowers, and aggravate aggression between them in the region, particularly in the South China Sea. Hence, I call for all concerned parties within this region and beyond to strengthen further active cooperation in promoting and sustaining the region as a region of peace, stability, as well as of growth and prosperity as espoused in the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific.³²

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 17 September 2021:

1. Indonesia takes note cautiously of the Australian Government's decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines.
2. Indonesia is deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region.
3. Indonesia stresses the importance of Australia's commitment to continue meeting all of its nuclear non-proliferation obligations.
4. Indonesia calls on Australia to maintain its commitment towards regional peace, stability and security in accordance with the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.
5. Indonesia encourages Australia and other parties concerned to advance dialogue in settling any differences peacefully. In this regard, Indonesia underscores the respect for international law, including UNCLOS 1982, in maintaining peace and security in the region.³³

Philippines Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro L Locsin, Jr, 17 September 2021:

The Philippines welcomes Australia's decision to establish an enhanced trilateral security partnership with the United States primarily and the United Kingdom.³⁴

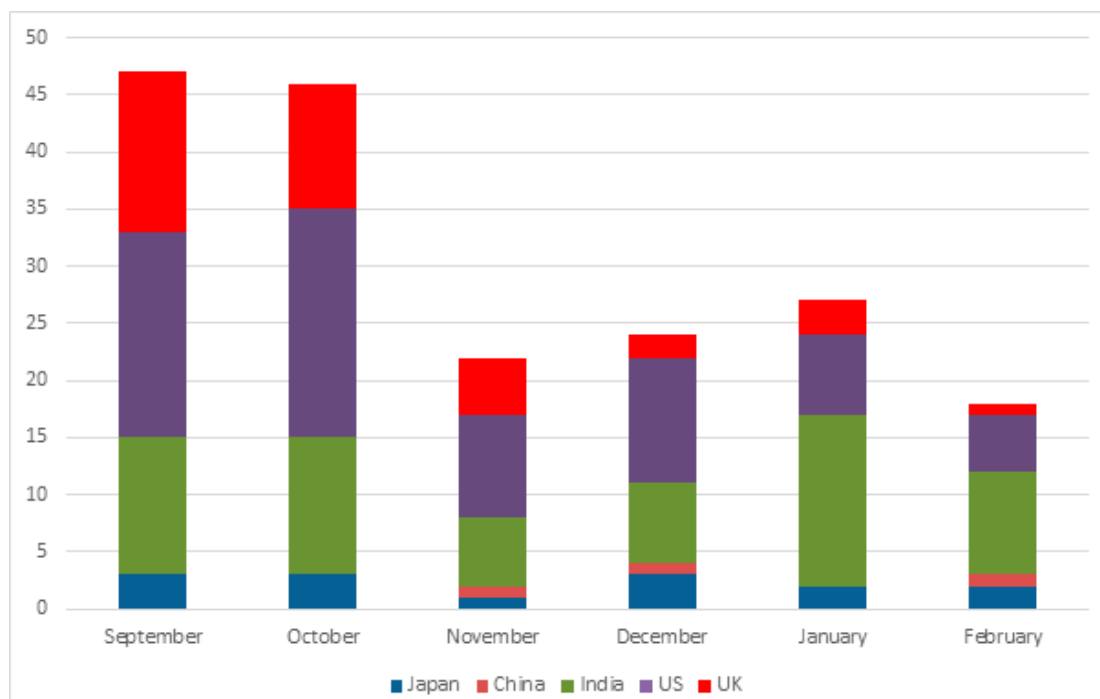
Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, 5 October 2021:

We hope that the newly established enhanced trilateral security partnership amongst Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) will contribute constructively to the peace and stability of the region and complement the existing regional architecture which is open and inclusive.³⁵

Think tanks and AUKUS

AUKUS was widely written about by multiple Quad and British think tanks throughout the September 2021 to February 2022 period, which reflects the agreement's initial impact. September and October 2021 were the most prolific months for pieces produced by leading Chinese, Japanese, Indian, British and American think tanks over the September 2021 to February 2022 period (Figure 2).

Figure 2: National think-tank pieces on AUKUS, per month*



*Graph research data collected by ASPI from major national thinktanks.

Production was dominated by the US (70 pieces), India (61) and the UK (32). The reception was largely positive. Japan published very few pieces, but those that appeared received the AUKUS announcement warmly. Very few pieces were produced by Chinese research bodies, although there may be many unpublished AUKUS works intended for internal readerships.

It isn't surprising that most think-tank pieces were produced in September and October, with a noticeable dip afterwards. Many of the early pieces were focused on assessing the immediate reactions from other nations as well as key issues such as the implications on the acquisition of SSNs for nuclear nonproliferation and deterrence. France's, China's and ASEAN's largely negative reactions were also recurring themes.

UK and US think tanks paid particular early attention to the effects of AUKUS on their nations' relationship with France and the need to rebuild the relationship in opposition to China in the Indo-Pacific. An article by Charles Kupchan from the American Council on Foreign Relations, *Europe's response to the US-UK-Australia submarine deal: What to know*, is thematically similar to many other think-tank pieces written during that period.³⁶

After the initial wave of AUKUS pieces following the agreement's announcement, the number of works declined rapidly in November but has remained fairly constant since then. Indian think-tank piece numbers remained largely consistent following October, but British and American numbers declined significantly. There was a small uptick in numbers following the key announcements of the head of the US lead in late November and other December developments, but lower numbers remained mostly consistent.

Nuclear nonproliferation was a key theme for December and January, which is probably a consequence of the IAEA Director General's introductory statement to the board of governors in late November.³⁷ However, there was a notable overall decrease in US-UK numbers following the September-October period. There were only minor upticks following major announcements and events such as the Ukraine crisis, renewing the discussions on strategy and national security. However, very few of the articles in the November-February period canvassed Australian policy positions.

American and British bodies devoted only a small amount of attention to Australian domestic policy, as they focused more on their own nations' response to AUKUS and how their local industries could potentially benefit from the agreement. There were, however, some pieces that canvassed Canberra's policies, including Sidharth Kaushal's commentary on what AUKUS provides for its participants in strategic terms.³⁸ In addition to Kaushal's analysis, there was an early American piece from Stephen Walt, which tracked changes in Australian public and business opinions in response to China's hostile trade actions as Canberra pushed for a coronavirus inquiry.³⁹ In comparison, Indian think-tank analysis mostly discussed Australian policy positions within the context of the Quad. Most pieces canvassing Australian attitudes were produced in the initial September-October surge, but fell away with the overall decline after October.

The overall decline in think-tank pieces has been, perhaps, a reflection of shifting interest as other international events came to dominate attention. The consistent number of articles produced during the November-January period, albeit in lower numbers, indicates that AUKUS hasn't been forgotten in India, the UK and the US. The additional subtle monthly uptick in articles following major announcements, also signifies a long-term interest in the AUKUS project and its broader significance.

Notes

- 1 Some of the announcements referred to in this report were released simultaneously in all three countries, meaning that they appeared on the previous day in the US (for example, 15 September for the original announcement). For simplicity, we'll use the Australian dates.
- 2 Scott Morrison, 'Media statement: Joint leaders' statement on AUKUS,' 16 September 2021, [online](#).
- 3 Scott Morrison, 'Remarks: The 2021 ASPI Sydney Dialogue', 17 November 2021, [online](#).
- 4 Michael Shoebridge, *What is AUKUS and what is it not?*, ASPI, Canberra, 2021, [online](#).
- 5 Michael R Gordon, Brett Forrest, 'US names leader for Australia submarine program aimed at countering China', *Wall Street Journal*, 16 November 2021, [online](#).
- 6 Morrison, 'Remarks: The 2021 ASPI Sydney Dialogue'.
- 7 The increase was included in Defence's mid-year budget update. The split between AUKUS implementation and the missile enterprise isn't specified. Moreover, the increased workforce appears to expire and isn't continued past 2022–23. Department of Defence, *Portfolio Additional Estimates Statements 2021–22: Defence portfolio*, Australian Government, 2022, 20–21, [online](#).
- 8 Office of the Spokesperson, 'Secretary Blinken's trilateral meeting with Australian Foreign Minister Payne and UK Foreign Secretary Truss on AUKUS', US State Department, 19 February 2022, [online](#).
- 9 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 'Fact sheet: Implementation of the Australia – United Kingdom – United States partnership (AUKUS)', Australian Government, 6 April 2022, [online](#).
- 10 Joe Courtney, 'Reps. Courtney, Gallagher, Kilmer, and Moore announce formation of the new bipartisan AUKUS Working Group, in support of the underseas alliance between the US, UK, and Australia', press release, 1 April 2022, [online](#).
- 11 Anthony Albanese, 'AUKUS partnership', media release, 16 September 2021, [online](#); Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, Estimates, Australian Senate, 6 April 2022, 18, [online](#).
- 12 Andrew Nicholls, Jackson Dowie, Marcus Hellyer, *Implementing Australia's nuclear submarine program*, ASPI, Canberra, 2021, [online](#).
- 13 VADM Johnathan Mead interview with ASPI.
- 14 Peter Dutton, 'Australia signs Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Sharing Agreement', media release, 22 November 2021. The text of the agreement and the accompanying national interest analysis are posted [online](#).
- 15 Nicholls et al., *Implementing Australia's nuclear submarine program*, 22.
- 16 Australian Embassy and Permanent Mission to the United Nations, 'Trilateral statement on behalf of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Agenda item 5: Transfer of the nuclear materials in the context of AUKUS and its safeguards in all aspects under the NPT', 24–26 November 2021, [online](#). See also the supporting non-paper, [online](#).
- 17 'IAEA Director General's introductory statement to the Board of Governors', International Atomic Energy Agency, 7 March 2022, [online](#).
- 18 Australian Embassy and Permanent Mission to the United Nations, 'Trilateral statement on behalf of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Agenda Item 5: Transfer of the nuclear materials in the context of AUKUS and its safeguards in all aspects under the NPT'. See also the supporting non-paper, [online](#) and the March 2022 non-paper, [online](#).
- 19 Andrew Greene, Stephen Dziedzic, 'Australia deploys diplomatic resources to fight Chinese and Russian "disinformation" on AUKUS submarine deal', *ABC News*, 11 February 2022, [online](#).
- 20 Peter Dutton, 'Australia to build additional submarine base', media release, 7 March 2022, [online](#).
- 21 Andrew Greene, 'Defence scrambles to train nuclear scientists for "exciting roles" on AUKUS program', *ABC News*, 19 December 2021, [online](#).
- 22 The White House, 'Readout of AUKUS Joint Steering Group meetings', 17 December 2021, [online](#).
- 23 Scott Morrison, 'Joint media statement—AUKUS leaders level statement,' 6 April 2022, [online](#).
- 24 Linda Reynolds, 'Australia collaborates with the US to develop and test high speed long-range hypersonic weapons', media release, 1 December 2020, [online](#).
- 25 Peter Dutton, 'Budget 2022–23 delivers record investment in Defence and supporting our veterans', joint media release, 29 March 2022, [online](#).
- 26 Department of Defence, *Portfolio Budget Statements 2022–23*, Australian Government, 2022, 15, [online](#).
- 27 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Press conference by Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu', media release, Japanese Government, 21 September 2021, [online](#).
- 28 'AUKUS has no link to Quad, won't impact grouping's function, says Shringla', *Hindustan Times*, 21 September 2021, [online](#).
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- 32 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Announcement by Australia, United Kingdom and the United States on Enhanced Trilateral Security Partnership—AUKUS', media release, Malaysian Government, 19 September 2021, [online](#).
- 33 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Statement on Australia's nuclear-powered submarines program', media release, Indonesian Government, 17 September 2021, [online](#).

- 34 Department of Foreign Affairs, 'Statement of Foreign Affairs Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr. on the Australia – United Kingdom – United States (AUKUS) Enhanced Trilateral Security Partnership', Philippines Government, 19 September 2021, [online](#).
- 35 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan's written reply to parliamentary question, 5 October 2021', Singaporean Government, 5 October 2021, [online](#).
- 36 Charles A Kupchan, *Europe's response to the US–UK–Australia submarine deal: What to know*, Council on Foreign Relations, 22 September 2021, [online](#).
- 37 International Atomic Energy Agency, 'IAEA Director General's introductory statement to the Board of Governors', 24 November 2021, [online](#).
- 38 Sidharth Kaushal, *What does the AUKUS deal provide its participants in strategic terms?*, Royal United Services Institute, 21 September 2021, [online](#).
- 39 Stephen M Walt, *The AUKUS dominoes are just starting to fall*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 18 September 2021, [online](#).

Acronyms and abbreviations

ASD	Australian Signals Directorate
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
PM&C	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
SSN	ship, submersible, nuclear (nuclear-powered fast attack submarine)

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